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Article

Revisiting the "Model of Place": A Comparative Study of Placemaking and Sustainability

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Abstract
The literature on sustainability policies and placemaking strategies reveals the inadequacy of both concepts to address current urban issues suggesting the need for new approaches. Sustainability researchers and policy makers are seeking an integrated approach to sustainability within which placemaking is a powerful tool in achieving sustainability goals. However, despite this rising awareness of place and its value, there is growing concern that the value of place and its urban meaning is declining. Placemaking appears to have changed from being an authentic everyday practice to a professional responsibility, and the understanding of the intangible character of place is mainly lost in the modern making of places. The emphasis of designers on physical design attributes assumes a fragile model of causality, underestimating the other necessary components for placemaking—behaviour and meaning. Comparing models of sustainability and place, this article suggests that there is need for a shift from the current model of placemaking towards a strong model of progress and balance in creating quality places. The article also describes the implications of the new model for design practice and how it could be used with the goal of achieving both placemaking and sustainability visions.

Keywords
community building; model of place; place; placemaking; sense of place; sustainability

Issue
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1. Introduction

Over the last few decades awareness of sustainability has increased significantly among governments, industry and the general public. Policymakers worldwide have sought to incorporate sustainability considerations into urban and industrial development. However, evidence from climate change science, a decline in public health, and an affordable housing crisis in several developed countries make it clear that recent development paths are not achieving the goal of sustainability (Myrick, 2011). Earlier Adams (2006) saw the problem lying in the dependence of the current paths to sustainability on natural science and economic issues. He argued these approaches to sustainability lacked emotion and ignored the citizen. However, both then and since others have argued that although there is nothing wrong with such—aspirational values of sustainability, most definitions are too loose to drive effective change on the scale required (Donovan, 2017; Fiksel, 2006; James, 2015), especially given the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations claimed the world had 60 harvests left.

Placemaking is also receiving more attention in the search to identify a more defined and human centred tool that could help to find a path to being much more sustainable (Donovan, 2017; Myrick, 2011). Both sustain-

ability researchers and policy makers are looking for an integrated approach to sustainability within which placemaking has been identified as a powerful tool in achieving sustainability goals (Donovan, 2017; Marsden, 2013; Myrick, 2011). New concepts of sustainability seek for a process that engages the community in the design process, while concurrently aiming to achieve sustainability goals at a more manageable scale. For example, Marsden (2013, p. 215) argues that because sustainability solutions are essentially based on the climate and resources of each particular location there is a need to create sustainable places. This article argues that such creations also need to deal concurrently with placemaking.

The term placemaking has appeared as one of the main visions in many city design guidelines (City of Adelaide, 2018; City of Victoria, 2012). Around the globe organizations are also advocating for placemaking, examples being the Project for Public Space (PPS; 2018), tactical urbanism (Lydon & Garcia, 2015), and temporary place activation (Bishop & Williams, 2012). These initiatives have also created much debate and discussion on the necessity of having community participation. In recent decades the latter, which has been claimed to be a core part of placemaking (Kalandides, 2018; Strydom & Puren, 2013), has gained in popularity. However, despite this rising awareness of place and its value, placemaking appears to fail to create meaningful places (Arefi & Triantafillou, 2005; Inam, 2002). Placemaking projects have been criticized as being a set of visual aesthetics that are replicated everywhere, and that reflect uniformity, standardization, and disconnection from the context (Corkery, 2016; Crommelin, 2016). Instead, placemaking process should be based on identifying needs and issues, and local community assets and capacities in order to allow for community engagement (Arefi, 2014) and hence the creation of meaningful places.

This article argues that the need for place-based design as raised by different disciplines is a clear indication that the current version of placemaking has been diverted from its original meaning and purpose. It begins by reviewing the evolution of models of sustainability and placemaking and their similarities and differences. It argues that if placemaking is to be a tool with which to achieve the goals of sustainability there needs to be a shift from the current model of placemaking towards a well-balanced model that more represents its original concept. This model implies a revolution of thought in the way experts currently study and involve themselves in placemaking practice.

2. Placemaking and the Evolution of Urban Design Thinking: The 19th and 20th Century

2.1. The Visual Artistic Tradition

Placemaking is as old as human civilization as people have always found ways to make their places meaningful (Crowe, 1995; Heidegger, 1971; Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995). However, placemaking as practiced today only dates back to the late twentieth century and can be viewed as the evolution and synthesis of two main traditions of thought—the visual-artistic and the social-usage (Carmona, 2010; Jarvis, 1980). While the former focuses on visual forms, the latter puts emphasis on people's use and experience of a place. This distinction in these two main streams of thought can be seen in current placemaking practice (Arefi, 2014). In this section, different traditions of thought and the concepts and theories that have influenced them are described, as a means of revealing the origin of the concept of placemaking.

In Greek philosophy, place is the foundation of everything, there being no separation between place and existence, as to exist means to exist in a place (Aristotle, 384–322 BC). However, it was not until the late 19th century that place became associated with a philosophical concept, mainly through the work of Heidegger (1889–1976) and his notion of dwelling (Cresswell, 2009). In Heidegger's view, dwelling is a representation of the way people make the world meaningful. Indeed, Heidegger's theory tries to bridge the gap between subject and object. This view affected the future work of human geographers who went on to develop the concept of place. Before then spatial science had looked at the world and the people in it as objects rather than subjects (Cresswell, 2009). Since the late 19th century the visual artistic tradition in urban design, although not directly influenced by a specific view of place and more driven by theories of aesthetic perception and the spatial presentation of art in urban design, concentrated on the visual qualities and aesthetic experience of an environment. In doing this it failed both to reference people's activities and discuss the public perception of places (Carmona, 2010). The aesthetic appreciation of the environment is a product of each person's perception and cognition, or how they judge and feel it. Different visual qualities stimulate different feelings for the viewer. For example, contrast can stimulate delight and interest (Cullen, 1961, p. 9). Sitte's (1889/1986) *City Planning According to Artistic Principles* and Cullen's (1961) *Townscape* were two influential publications that supported this tradition. Sitte (1889/1986, p. 30) even claimed spaces should be arranged based on visual experience.

2.2. The Social-Usage Tradition

The years between 1960 and 1970 saw the development of the rational view of space in reaction to the absolute view. Behavioural geographers who looked to psychology stated that space was not an object and that the mental process of each individual shaped their understanding of space (Kirk, Lösch, & Berlin, 1963). Since the 1970s place has been conceptualized as a location that has acquired a set of meanings and attachments (Cresswell, 2009). Human geographers (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977) have increasingly turned to ideas that concern the sense of place. For human geographers, place acquired mean-

ing through lived experiences. They put less emphasis on the physical location and more on relationship between people and the environment. Relph's (1976) relational view of place saw it not as a bounded territory but as a unit that was shaped by its social, cultural, and economic context. For him, sense of place arose from human feelings and their interaction with physical spatial elements. Earlier, Barker (1968), from the field of ecological psychology, had introduced the concept of behaviour setting. Behaviour setting included a physical pattern (the milieu), and a standing pattern of behaviour (a recurrent behaviour of a group, such as a football game or a piano lesson) that worked as a unit in a period of time. Later, this approach led on to using observation to understand people's preferences and was adopted by urban designers as a method of studying a place (Gehl, 1987; Whyte, 1980). Around the same period of time in the urban design field, the reaction against the creation of new locations which were mostly mono-functional (Jordaan, Puren, & Roos, 2008) led to a move towards the theories emanating from human geography in order to understand the problems modernism had created for the city. The social usage tradition of thought emerged from this concern about placelessness. It focused on how people use space and became two strands of thinking. The first had a focus on the psychology of place and the second on activity and the quality of place.

Looking at these two strands in more detail, the first stated people rely on their senses and internal guidance to help them define places as safe, comfortable, and quiet, while recognising that spaces need activities. Alexander, Ishikawa and Silverstain (1977) and Lynch (1960) claimed a person's image of the city was related to memories and meaning. This tradition was mostly focused on how people gathered information through their senses and how in turn this information was then assimilated in a cognitive process (environmental cognition). The underlying idea was that in order to understand the environment, people connected individual symbols in the form of a cognitive map. As (Rapoport, 1982, p. 68) explained "meanings are attached to both the physical and the social environment, and are represented as such in their cognitive maps". In his study, Lynch (1960) showed how environmental meanings were spatially represented in the form of edges, nodes, paths, districts, and landmarks. In contrast to the visual tradition, instead of examining the physical form, Lynch believed it was necessary to study perception and mental image. In *The Phenomenon of Place*, Norberg-Schulz (1996), who was partly influenced by Heidegger (1971), reintroduced the concepts of character, identity, and spirit of place. He established a strong link between the distinctive sense of place and genius loci. In the second strand of social-usage thinking, pioneers like Jacobs (1961), Whyte (1980), and Gehl (1987) placed more emphasis on activity, stating that places were meaningful because of the activities that took place in them. Where the quality of spaces was poor the social activities declined or disappeared. They believed the level of activity both produced and mirrored the quality of the built environment (Montgomery, 1998).

2.3. Placemaking

Placemaking has attempted to synthesise both traditions. Here, the meaning of the environment has led to attachment to a place. Physical space, sensory experience, and activity making should be combined to produce successful space. This is more a balanced view of placemaking that also put emphasis on the process. These traditions of thought had interrelationships and overlaps and suggested a broad and complex framework for the effects of quality of environment on the social aspects of quality of life (Figure 1).

Since 2000, the community-based design approach to placemaking has gained in popularity. In urban design literature Whyte (1980) and Jacobs (1961) are often mentioned as the pioneers of the placemaking movement, although neither used the term placemaking in their publications (Relph, 2016). Relph (2016) argued that much of the current enthusiasm for placemaking seemed to stem from the work of Schneekloth and Shibley (1995), who reintroduced the concept of placemaking and claimed that placemaking was not just a relationship between people and places but also the way to create relationships between people and places (Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995).

2.4. Industrialisation, Globalisation, and Placemaking

Schneekloth and Shibley (1995) provided a broad definition of placemaking. To them placemaking included all the ways human beings transform the places where they live. It encompassed cultivating land, planting gar-

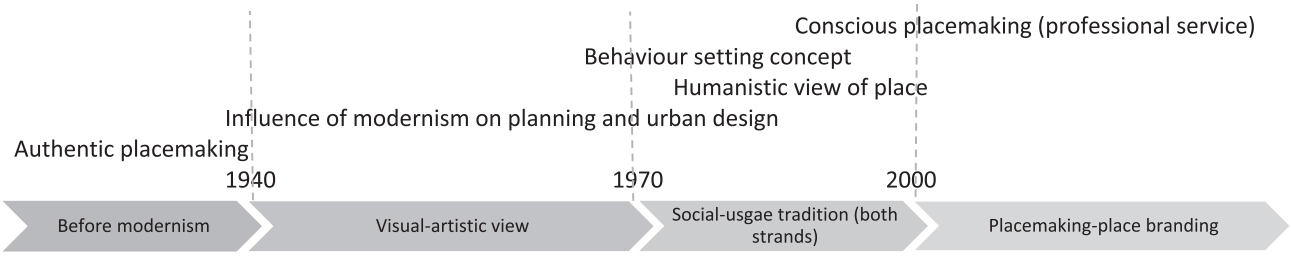

Figure 1. Evolution of urban design thinking. Dates are only approximate as there is overlap between them. Source: authors.

dens, the everyday acts of renovation and maintenance, and making neighbourhoods. However, since design and planning have been assigned to professional placemakers (Figure 1; e.g., landscape architects, urban designers, urban planners, and architects), it seems much of the ability to create meaningful places has been lost (Arefi & Triantafillou, 2005; Inam, 2002; Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995). The prevailing model of recent design strategies for places based on the approach of expert-users is mostly focused on place as a visual end product (Rozentale, Jong, & Kinasts, 2015). Planners tend to think about urban problems in physical terms and attempt to address such problems in a rational way. The result is a product with specific elements that are claimed to be the answer to a complex problem (Arefi & Triantafillou, 2005). In this industrialised structure of planning and placemaking, experts deliver the product to the agent who commissioned the work (Rozentale et al., 2015). The allocation of work to such a small group of people (designers) essentially disables others, such as the local community, something that had been recognised many years previously (Francis, 1999; Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995). The conscious attempt of designers to create a sense of place can "easily end up as manipulative corporate formulae or nostalgic ideologies written rather literally into space" (Dovey, 2010, p. 3). This seems to stem from reducing the understanding of place to the study of physical setting, form, and morphology. The understanding of the intangible character of place so that residents will associate with it, has mostly been lost in the modern making of places. Simply relying on expert opinions will not lead to an understanding of the meaning of place, which instead needs a long term study of the experience of its residents in order to create the story of the place, as the meanings people assign to their environment are not easily detectable by an outsider (Arefi & Triantafillou, 2005). Most current community consultation in the design process has been made mandatory by the local council. Healey (2007, 2012) has argued that although this does not prevent public consultation, it has only led to a minimal standard of socially inclusive decision making.

Globalisation also affected the practice of placemaking. In most placemaking projects, standardized landscaping and applying what is often referred to by designers as best practice to different locations without incorporating local knowledge and involving local people, has led to a decline in the sense of place and social capital in urban areas (Arefi & Triantafillou, 2005; Inam, 2002). The technique, model, or policy related to a recognised set of benchmarks has been applied to another setting to achieve the same desired improvements (Beza, 2016). In this transition, the social context of the new setting has usually been overlooked, and the designer has only transferred a set of designs focused on aesthetic outcomes. For example, flowing the decision to use tactical urbanism as a temporary solution in the city, Placekit (Figure 2) which is a set of modular planters and seating, was introduced in Auckland, New Zealand. The set was designed in collaboration with New York's Street Plans Collaborative and has been used in various locations in the city for temporary place activation or creation of spaces. Although, it is an interesting concept, it suggests the belief that one solution does fit everywhere. This raises the question of how well these global solutions fit with the local context and how much the local community care about them.

In the context of globalisation more cities have been competing to attract creative talent. Place branding (Figure 1) and focusing on talent attraction and retention has in turn led to gentrification (PPS, 2013). Places have been competing to draw creative people, based on the argument that the place will benefit from the cut and paste of lifestyle, cafés and artesian markets. PPS (2013) argued that neighbourhoods need to define their own priorities and discover their own local opportunities instead of bringing in foreign talent. This suggests the need for a different approach to and view of place-

Figure 2. Placekit, is an example of using global solutions for local issues. Only few weeks after installation, the plants dried out, no local community of care existed amongst the businesses and residents living on the street to support the success of the installation and the Council agency didn't follow through to maintain the planters in support of a care for place.

making, which sees place as a physical setting inseparable from its social, cultural, and meaningful context. There is a need for a model that empowers the community and engages them in all stages, from identifying local opportunities, to development of place, and its maintenance (Dempsey, Smith, & Burton, 2014; Nettler, 2013; Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995).

2.5. Twentieth Century Models of Place

The common models of place are presented as three overlapping circles of activity, form (physical setting), and concept (image). Although stemming from different points of view, all models suggest physical setting, conception or image of space, and activity work together in creating a sense of place (Bishop & Marshall, 2014; Canter, 1977; Cresswell, 2009; Tuan, 1977; Relph, 1976; Stedman, 2003). Early on, a balance between these three components was seen as forming a sense of place, which in turn was fundamental for a place to be well used over time (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977).

Relph (1976) suggested the three components of place were physical setting, activities, and meaning. Canter (1977), as an environmental psychologist, considered action, conception, and physicality to be the three main elements for creating place (Figure 3). His model offered a more balanced view between the tangible and intangible attributes of place and showed that place was a consequence of the relationship between action (activity), conception (a person's perception), and physical attributes. Punter (1991) suggested another diagram for enhancing the identity of place that would be more useful for urban designers (Figure 4). Later, Montgomery (1998) reworked the diagram (Figure 5).

Although these models of place suggested the need for a balance between place attributes, there was no way of ensuring this would happen in practice. Earlier, Agnew (1987) coming from a social and political viewpoint identified the three components of place as locale, the setting in which social relationships are constituted, location, the geographical area encompassing the setting for social interaction, and sense of place, the local structure of feeling. In order to capture the meaning of place fully, he stressed that all these three elements should be taken into account. Thus, meaningful places would emerge in a social context and through social relations that were geographically located and at the same time related to their social, economic, and cultural surroundings. Only then would they give individuals a sense of place. Although, Agnew presented a more comprehensive view of place, through the emphasis on the social and geographic context, this model has not yet been fully considered or acted upon in urban design principles. The Marxist geographer David Harvey (1996) also wrote about social construct of place, disagreeing with the idea of place having fixed entities. It thus seems there are many ideas

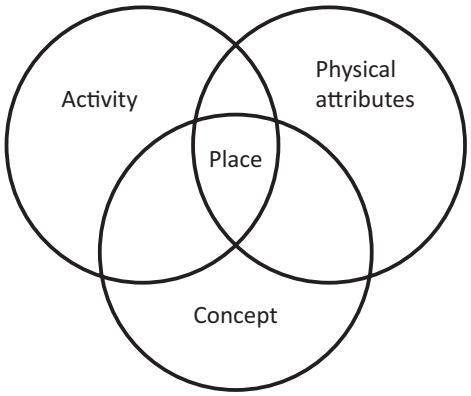

Figure 3. Canter's (1977, p. 185) model of place.

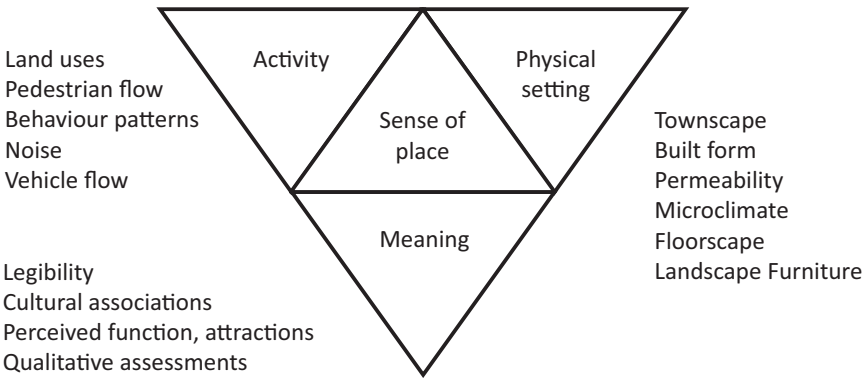

Figure 4. Components of sense of place (Punter, 1991, p. 27).

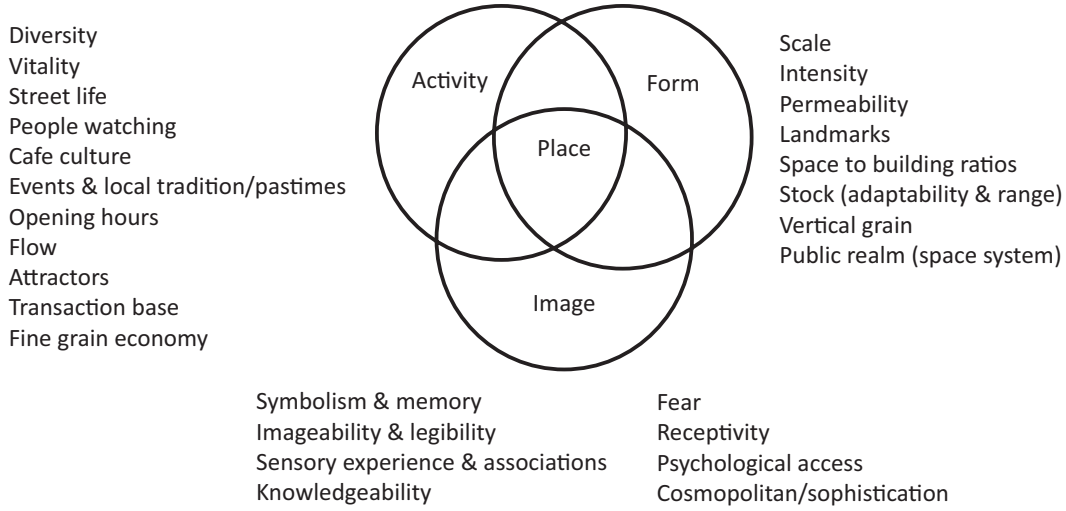

Figure 5. Policy direction to foster place making (Montgomery, 1998, p. 98).

about the theory behind placemaking, some building on each other, while others stemming from different disciplines emphasise different aspects. It is also clear that the model of place as incorporated by many in the urban design discipline has not been always practiced based on the concept of place as a social construct and a process.

3. Sustainability

Historically, human civilisation has been sustainable (Bovill, 2014) in the terms that humanity lived within the environment of the planet in a way that did not destroy its ability to sustain human existence, even given the changes that people made to it. McHarg (1992) considered the Renaissance as the turning point in the power of humanity over the land, when it rejected the cosmology of the golden age. In his view primitive society respected natural laws and was aware of the environment, this being intertwined in their religion and life, but after the 16th century, with the idea of palpable power, this rule began to be ignored and nature was seen as material to be used. In the 19th and 20th centuries human beings changed nature through using larger tools. The changes people make today and continue to make are unlike the changes people made in the past, as these did not have a global effect (McKibben, 1989).

The idea of sustainability as introduced by ICUN in 1969, and as discussed at the 1972 United Nations Conference in Stockholm, has later been seen as a way to achieve economic growth without environmental damage (Adams, 2006). At the time, the focus was on thinking about ways to extract more from the environment without destroying it beyond the point where it could continue to support human life on earth, this being termed sustainable development (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). In the view of that time, sustainable development was to be a process that integrated environmental, economic, and social considerations while respecting the fact that global resources were limited, and that this could affect the type of economy and the resultant lifestyle. However, this idea had consequences, as sustainable integration of environment, economic, and social goals implied change for many in the world.

Clearly, human perception of nature has changed over the years, being based on the belief of each individual, and being influenced by where they live, and their knowledge. Williams (1988) simplified these man-nature relationships into three main ideas: intrinsic in the 13th century, universal from the 14th century onwards, and exclusive nature from the 17th century, acknowledging that there was always an overlap. Intrinsic in this context is essence or the essential characteristics of a thing, viewing the environment as something separate from humanity, or the man-nature relationship. External nature is seen as the external, unmediated material world, nature that has not been touched by man. Universal nature includes all-encompassing force controlling things in the world like natural laws or Mother nature. Table 1 summarises attitudes to nature, including the modern idea of sustainability.

3.1. Sustainability Model

The three dimensions of modern sustainability (economic, social and environmental) have been represented three overlapping circles (Adams, 2006; Figure 6), which stressed the importance of the intersection between the three areas (Todorov & Marinova, 2009). Earlier Murcott (1997) claimed this model would not serve the needs of sustainable development, as it assumed one of the three aspects could be substituted for another, whereas if the environment were damaged beyond the point where it could sustain human existence, this must mean the model was faulty. This has normally been called the weak model of sustainability. In contrast, in the strong model the environment is more important and encompasses both society and the economy (Vale & Vale, 2009). In

Table 1. Different views of nature. Source: authors.

	Perception of nature				
Period of history	Intrinsic nature	External nature	Universal nature	Awareness of power to change	Working with nature
Hunter gathering			x	Low	High
Greek thinking	x			Moderate	High
Renaissance thinking		x	x	Moderate	Moderate
Modern thinking		x		High	Low
Sustainability theory	x	x	x	High	High

this model maintenance of the environment function is essential for the life of an ecosystem. Sustainable development is thus development that synchronises and harmonises economic, social, and ecological processes (Todorov & Marinova, 2009; Figure 6).

3.2. Sustainability and Placemaking

Reed (2007, p. 674) argued that current sustainability practices were based on doing the same thing more efficiently to reduce the damage done to the planet. He encouraged designers to go beyond this and base their design on the health of the ecological systems involved. He used the term "regenerative design" as a place-based design process that emphasised engagement with all stakeholders (people, biotic systems, the earth as a system) in any design intervention as the path to sustainability (Reed, 2007, p. 677). He then argued that place-based engagement could be a way of managing global scale issues like global warming and the need to change energy use and generation. Like some placemaking theories, this puts the emphasis on working with the local, so making a connection with placemaking could be a significant opportunity for forwarding the move towards sustainability. The Sustainable Places Research Institute (Marsden, 2013) put forward this idea using the term "sustainable placemaking" to emphasise the current lack of what they describe as active and engaged placemaking, which integrates communities, ecologies and economy:

> Therefore, that one significant scholarly opportunity for sustainability science is to embrace concepts of contingent and contested 'placemaking'; whilst one equally significant challenge for the human geography and planning community is to embrace 'sustainable placemaking' as a central feature for development. (Marsden, 2013, p. 214)

Marsden (2013) also argued that in order to move toward sustainability a model of placing making is required that would bring the energies of the community and nature together. This again raises the question of whether the current placemaking model could support a move toward a more integrated approach to tackling the current issues facing cities, including the need to be part of a sustainable society.

4. Conclusion

Both sustainability and placemaking are terms that are perhaps overused, and without being comprehensively understood. While the concept of sustainability has been revised through introducing new models and promoting integrated approaches, placemaking practice has yet to

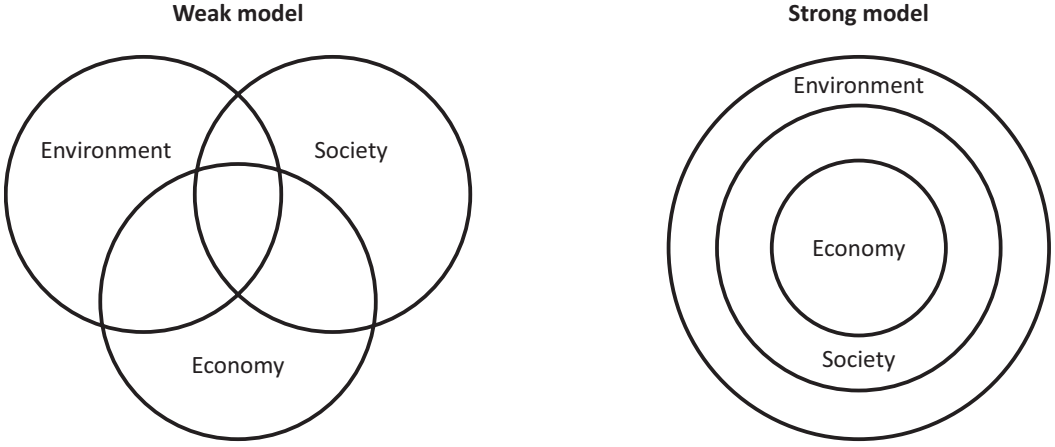

Figure 6. Weak and strong models of sustainability.

respond in a similar way. The current model of place as used by most designers remains a psychological or geographical definition and is yet to be updated to the more recent concept of place as a process and social construct. The review of attitudes to sustainability and placemaking reveals significant similarities between two concepts. In fact, new views of sustainable development bring these two concepts even closer together.

Meaningful places which are recognized as having a sense of place depend on achieving a balance between several criteria and not just on the physical design of the space. Of equal importance are what happens in that space and how this leads to a set of memories that invest the space with meaning. Here a useful comparison can be made with the theoretical models of sustainability. In these, there must be a balance between the three issues of environment, society, and economy. Sustainability will not be achieved by preservation of the environment alone, even if this were possible. Equally, sustainability will not be achieved unless the economy is in balance with what the resources of the planet can sustain. Moreover, society must change in response to this need for balance. It is not possible to continue 'business as usual' and think this will lead to sustainability. Equally, this balance is also always changing. Sustainability is not a fixed state but a goal of all humanity living within the resources that the planet's ecosystems can provide, which will change as nature changes over time. The current models of place have interesting similarities with the weak model of sustainability, which suggests that sustainability occurs at the overlap, or integration point of economy, society, and environment. However, as discussed above, the weak model of sustainability is not a true reflection of the meaning of the word. Could there, therefore, be a nested model of placemaking, similar to the strong model of sustainability?

By referencing Canter's (1977) balanced view of place and Agnew's (1987) definition the authors propose a nested representation of place as below (Figure 7). Such a model would see meaning nested within social context and social context nested within physical setting.

As Aristotle believed, location is both the basis of place and of being sustainable in that place. The definitions of both placemaking and sustainability emphasise the importance of location, as this is where the process of place production happens, based on the local ecology and landscape. For a place to be balanced and in harmony with its context, it is important to be a fit with its physical setting. Physical setting is where social interaction, policy, power, and the resultant economy can define people's relationships with each other. Placemaking is not just about physical making, remaking, and unmaking of the material word (Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995), but is rather an inextricably intertwined knot of spatiality and society. Meaning and sense of place is the core of place (Agnew, 1987; Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977). It is through connection with each other and the local ecology that people assign meaning to the environment. This may well be the hardest point to reach, but it is an essential of sustainable placemaking. While the current model of place introduced by Canter (1977) represents a balance between the elements of place it does not support sustainable placemaking, as its element can be substituted for each other.

The model of place as a set of nested attributes aligns with the integrated ideal of sustainability, calling for place-based design that engages with its local community. While any changes need to be cognisant about the physical setting, the social interaction and meaning of place also play a crucial role in creating places that people are attached to, and in the choices, they make regarding the environment where they live. Sustainability is a very broad concept that mainly focuses on the global or national scale rather than the local. However, sustainability projects must be grounded in human experience, hence socially sustainable projects must begin by reimagining the place-bound connections between the big and the small (Donovan, 2017). This is the area

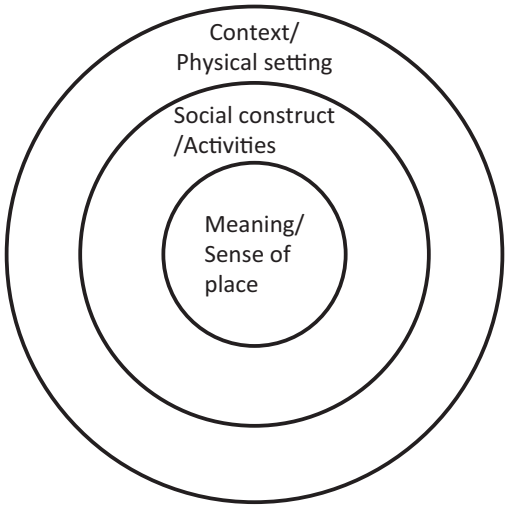

Figure 7. Proposed strong/nested model of placemaking. Source: authors.

where placemaking coincides with moving towards sustainable living.

The suggested model has two major implications for placemaking practice. First, meaning and sense of place are core to placemaking and should be the fundamental drivers behind all placemaking projects. Any physical intervention is a tool to add in understanding, retaining, or strengthening people's connection with place. This is in contrast with the current process of placemaking that puts physical change at the heart of the process in the belief that places will continue to be used and loved and will remain active in the long term (PPS, 2013). The second implication is that the focus should be on the local scale, just as place has always been bounded by its location. Although the static sense of place that comes from the humanistic view has been criticized, there is no doubt that building community, liveable neighbourhoods, and cared for and active public spaces is only possible if local people make connection with the place. The more people are attached to the place and ascribe meaning to it, the more they would come to concern themselves with the environmental challenges in their surroundings. If it is obvious that what sustains life comes from the immediate location, then the instinct is to care for that location to make sure that it can continue to sustain life. This could be a fundamental in moving to sustainability, just as it could be fundamental in creating places that have meaning for people. However, the local community has to be engaged with such changes, and this is the challenge for both sustainability and placemaking.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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